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People and govt of Vanuatu invited China in as stabilizer for region: Vanuatu observer

Friends of South Pacific

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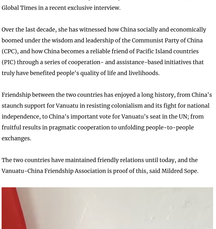
Editor's Note:

As the world grapples with unilateralism-induced crises that have threatened global peace, China continues to be a shining example on the international stage, injecting a stable, developmental and cooperative momentum. Over the last decade, China, under the strong leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), has achieved great success in record time, hitherto unseen in world history, including lifting nearly 100 million people out of absolute poverty, the unreserved promotion of multilateralism, and the adoption of a win-win development strategy among countries. In this series, the Global Times will interview diplomats from various countries to get their views on China's development and what it means for the world as a whole.

In this installment, the Global Times reporter interviewed Mildred Sope, President of the Vanuatu-China Friendship Association who shared the South Pacific Islands' views on China.



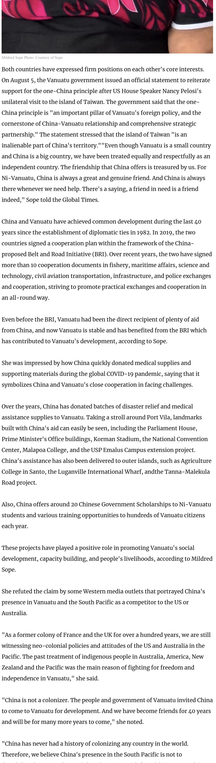
A Chinese and Vanuatu official lay the foundation stone for the airport road rehab construction by a Chinese company in Vanuatu. Photo: coopbate

China is not a destabilizer to the South Pacific region, but rather a stabilizer with friendship, Mildred Sope, president of the Vanuatu-China Friendship Association and wife of Barak Sope, former prime minister of Vanuatu, told the Global Times in a recent exclusive interview.

Over the last decade, she has witnessed how China socially and economically boomed under the wisdom and leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and how China becomes a reliable friend of Pacific Island countries (PIC) through a series of cooperation - and assistance-based initiatives that truly have benefited people's quality of life and livelihoods.

Friendship between the two countries has enjoyed a long history, from China's staunch support for Vanuatu in resisting colonialism and its fight for national independence, to China's important vote for Vanuatu's seat in the UN; from fruitful results in pragmatic cooperation to unfolding people-to-people exchanges.

The two countries have maintained friendly relations until today, and the Vanuatu-China Friendship Association is proof of this, said Mildred Sope.



Mildred Sope Photo: Courtesy of Sope

Both countries have expressed firm positions on each other's core interests. On August 5, the Vanuatu government issued an official statement to reiterate support for the one-China principle after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's unilateral visit to the island of Taiwan. The government said that the one-China principle is "an important pillar of Vanuatu's foreign policy, and the cornerstone of China-Vanuatu relationship and comprehensive strategic partnership." The statement stressed that the island of Taiwan "is an inalienable part of China's territory." "Even though Vanuatu is a small country and China is a big country, we have been treated equally and respectfully as an independent country. The friendship that China offers is treasured by us. For Ni-Vanuatu, China is always a great and genuine friend. And China is always there whenever we need help. There's a saying, a friend in need is a friend indeed," Sope told the Global Times.

China and Vanuatu have achieved common development during the last 40 years since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1982. In 2019, the two countries signed a cooperation plan within the framework of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Over recent years, the two have signed more than 10 cooperation documents in fishery, maritime affairs, science and technology, civil aviation transportation, infrastructure, and police exchanges and cooperation, striving to promote practical exchanges and cooperation in an all-round way.

Even before the BRI, Vanuatu had been the direct recipient of plenty of aid from China, and now Vanuatu is stable and has benefited from the BRI which has contributed to Vanuatu's development, according to Sope.

She was impressed by how China quickly donated medical supplies and supporting materials during the global COVID-19 pandemic, saying that it symbolizes China and Vanuatu's close cooperation in facing challenges.

Over the years, China has donated batches of disaster relief and medical assistance supplies to Vanuatu. Taking a stroll around Port Vila, landmarks built with China's aid can easily be seen, including the Parliament House, Prime Minister's Office buildings, Korman Stadium, the National Convention Center, Malapoa College, and the USP Emalus Campus extension project. China's assistance has also been delivered to outer islands, such as Agriculture College in Santo, the Luganville International Wharf, and the Tanna-Malekula Road project.

Also, China offers around 20 Chinese Government Scholarships to Ni-Vanuatu students and various training opportunities to hundreds of Vanuatu citizens each year.

These projects have played a positive role in promoting Vanuatu's social development, capacity building, and people's livelihoods, according to Mildred Sope.

She refuted the claim by some Western media outlets that portrayed China's presence in Vanuatu and the South Pacific as a competitor to the US or Australia.

"As a former colony of France and the UK for over a hundred years, we are still witnessing neo-colonial policies and attitudes of the US and Australia in the Pacific. The past treatment of Indigenous people in Australia, America, New Zealand and the Pacific was the main reason of fighting for freedom and independence in Vanuatu," she said.

"China is not a colonizer. The people and government of Vanuatu invited China to come to Vanuatu for development. And we have become friends for 40 years and will be for many more years to come," she noted.

"China has never had a history of colonizing any country in the world. Therefore, we believe China's presence in the South Pacific is not to destabilize, but instead, to stabilize the region with friendship. For us, China is always a true friend to our South Pacific people," she stressed.

She believes that the signing of the security agreement between China and the Solomon islands should be treated as "a norm" for Australia and New Zealand rather than a threat as some Western countries exaggeratedly claimed.

Sope told the Global Times that her husband, Barak Sope, had predicted years ago that China would become a strong economic power like it is today. "As Barak Sope said, when he was a young boy, he witnessed how hardworking Chinese people are in Vanuatu. Also, from my last visit to China, I have seen it by myself with all the development that has happened in China over the last decade. This is something that we need to learn from China."

"Chinese diplomats that I had met were very respectful and friendly. They have always adhered to the principle of equality that the CPC espouses. This is why I will never forget and will continue to cherish friends from China. We believe our friendship between Vanuatu and China will last forever," she added.

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